

ABOUT THE COVER


Louisiana Waterthrush

The Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*) gets its scientific name from its habit of wagging its tail up and down as it forages along streambeds or perches on rocks. *Seiurus* is from the Greek for “shaking tail,” and *motacilla* from the Latin, meaning “move tail.” It is an early migrant wood warbler, and its loud, whistled song is a harbinger of spring for many birdwatchers. This drab bird has a brown back, tail, and wings and is boldly streaked brown below on white to buffy feathers. It is similar in appearance to its close relative, the Northern Waterthrush, but has a larger bill, a broad, white superciliary stripe, a white, unspotted throat, and buffy, rather than yellow or white flanks. Immature birds and adults of both sexes are similar in plumage. The species is monotypic (no subspecies) and forms a superspecies with the Northern Waterthrush.

Louisiana Waterthrushes breed locally throughout most of the eastern half of the United States, from southern Ontario and New England south to northern Florida, and west to east Texas and Minnesota. They are nocturnal migrants that winter from northern Mexico through Central America and in the West Indies and Caribbean islands. They are considered uncommon local breeders in Massachusetts, and a very uncommon migrant, although in April a few show up in the local warbler hot spots such as Mount Auburn Cemetery, Nahant, or Marblehead Neck. They leave for their wintering grounds in July or August.


Louisiana Waterthrushes are seasonally monogamous and produce a single brood. They favor swiftly flowing, gravel-bottomed streams in moist, hilly, deciduous woodlands and forest, or sometimes around woodland ponds. The male sings a loud and melodious two-part song, the first consisting of 2-5 *seeup, seeup, seeup* notes, followed by a series of short notes of varying length and complexity. The male begins singing on arrival on his streamside territory, which is typically long and narrow, following the geography of the streambed. He will sing all day long until a pair bond has been established, whereupon singing is much reduced. The song serves to attract a mate as well as to advertise his territorial rights to neighboring males. He sings from a perch that can vary from several feet to thirty-five feet above the stream. A twittering flight song, often at dusk, accompanies the slow, exaggerated wingbeats of his nuptial flight display. Females also sing, but not with the clarity or intensity of males. Both also have a variety of *chip, churr,* and *chut* calls. Vigorous chases occur between males that sometimes end in fights, with males facing each other in the air, attacking with bills, wings, and claws. They also face each other on the ground and raise and lower their wings, giving *zizz* calls. The function of tail wagging is poorly understood, but it shares this behavior with other ground and stream-dwelling birds, such as the Northern Waterthrush and Spotted Sandpiper. Louisiana Waterthrushes are also territorial on their wintering grounds, defending a section of stream as they do on the breeding grounds.

The pair chooses a nest site, usually a cavity along the stream bank under logs or in the roots of a fallen tree. Both are involved in construction of a nest of leaves, twigs, and mud, lined with moss and fine plant fibers. The female typically lays five red-brown spotted, white eggs. She alone has a brood patch and does all of the incubation prior to hatching in 12-14 days. The female broods the chicks that fledge in 10-12 days. Adults will perform distraction displays to potential nest predators, and both parents feed the fledglings for 3-4 weeks.

Louisiana Waterthrushes forage mostly in the stream channel for aquatic insects and other invertebrates. They also glean low vegetation, leaf-litter, moss, and rocks, and will hawk insects from the air. They have been reported eating small frogs and fish, and hence are one of the few wood warblers to take vertebrate prey. They also forage at the edges of swamps and ponds. They are preyed upon by accipiters, and their nests are subject to predation by snakes and mammals, such as raccoons and opossums. They are frequently victims of Brown-headed Cowbird nest parasitism – one study reported that 81 percent of nests were parasitized. They fight back, however, and may bury cowbird eggs or puncture them with their beaks and eject them from the nest. Louisiana Waterthrush populations in the eastern United States appear to be declining, but increasing in the west. Habitat destruction and forest fragmentation on both the breeding and wintering grounds is a problem that appears to plague most long-distance migrant, forest interior species. They appear, however, to be expanding their range in northern New England, perhaps a response to reforestation of areas cut down in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

Julie Zickefoose is a widely published natural history writer and artist. Educated at Harvard University in biology and art, she worked for six years as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy before turning to a freelance career. Her observations on the natural history and behavior of birds stem from more than three decades of experience in the field. With her husband Bill Thompson III, Editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and their two children, Phoebe and Liam, Julie lives on an 80-acre nature sanctuary in the Appalachian foothills of southeast Ohio. A 42-foot tall bird-watching tower atop their home helps them enjoy and catalogue the wildlife of the sanctuary. Julie's art and writings may be seen at <http://www.juliezickefoose.com>. 



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